

IMAGING DEVICE

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

This application is based upon and claims the benefit of priority from the prior
5 Japanese Patent Application No. 2003-007902, filed on January 16, 2003, the entire
contents of which are incorporated herein by reference.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. Field of the Invention

10 The present invention relates to an imaging device equipped with an imaging
sensor.

2. Description of the Related Art

Dark current components that are superimposed on pixel signals of an imaging
15 sensor equipped in an electronic camera are corrected by a signal processing circuit in
the electronic camera. So far, many types of correcting methods have been proposed
(Japanese Unexamined Patent Application Publication No. Hei 7-236093, and so forth).

However, the conventional correcting methods are based on the assumption that
dark current components of each pixel outputs of an imaging sensor are almost constant.
20 Thus, dark current components caused by an FDA cannot be corrected reliably.

Here, the FDA is an abbreviation of Floating Diffusion Amplifier that is disposed at
an output end of an imaging sensor.

To cause the FDA to operate, it is necessary to apply a bias current thereto.
However, when a current is applied to the FDA, it generates heat.

25 When the FDA generates heat and in particular electric charge accumulation time

is long (30 seconds or longer), dark current components that are ignorable are superimposed on the pixel signals of the imaging sensor.

However, since heat radially spreads from the FDA, the amounts of the dark currents differ depend on the positions of the pixels. Therefore, the dark current components that occur in the imaging sensor caused by the FDA are local.

The dark current components that locally occur cannot be corrected reliably by the conventional correcting methods.

To decrease the dark current components that locally occur, a technology for temporally suppressing the bias current to be applied to the FDA in the case where the electric charge accumulation time of the imaging sensor is long has been proposed. However, since the technology is incapable of completely suppressing heat generation, it is not sufficient to reliably correct dark current components.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

Therefore, an object of the present invention is to provide an imaging device which can reliably correct even dark current components that locally occur on an imaging sensor like those caused by the FDA.

An imaging device according to the present invention includes: a storage unit which pre-stores information representing a relation between one of dark current components and an output signal of an optical black pixel arranged in a predetermined optical black area on an imaging sensor, the dark current components are superimposed on pixel signals of effective pixels, respectively, arranged in a predetermined effective pixel area on the imaging sensor; a dark current obtaining unit which obtains dark current components superimposed on pixel signals of the respective effective pixels based on both the information stored in the storage unit and output signal of the optical black

pixel; and a correcting unit which corrects the dark current components obtained by the dark current obtaining unit according to the pixel signals.

Therefore, the dark current components that locally occur on the imaging sensor are reliably corrected.

5 Preferably, the information stored in the storage unit is information representing a ratio of the one of dark current components to the output signal every one of lines of the effective pixel area.

 Thus, the capacity of the storage unit can be decreased. In addition, the calculation (in this example, integrating) for correcting the dark current components is
10 simple.

 In addition, preferably, the information stored in the storage unit is information representing a difference between the one of dark current components and the output signal every one of lines of the effective pixel area.

 Thus, the capacity of the storage unit can be decreased. In addition, the
15 calculation (in this example, subtraction) for correcting the dark current components is simple.

 In addition, preferably, the information stored in the storage unit is information representing a position of the optical black pixel in the optical black area every one of the effective pixels in the effective pixel area. The optical black pixel outputs an output
20 signal having a value equal to the one of dark current components.

 Thus, although the capacity of the storage unit becomes large, the accuracy of the correction becomes high.

 In addition, preferably, the optical black area is composed of the optical black pixel for at least one line from which the output signal is read prior to the pixel signals
25 of the top line of the effective pixel area.

Thus, the dark currents can be corrected in real time.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The nature, principle, and utility of the invention will become more apparent from
5 the following detailed description when read in conjunction with the accompanying
drawings in which like parts are designated by identical reference numbers, in which:

Fig. 1 is a schematic diagram showing a structure of an electronic camera
according to a first embodiment (a second embodiment and a third embodiment) of the
present invention;

10 Fig. 2(a) and Fig. 2(b) are schematic diagrams describing a CCD imaging sensor
11;

Fig. 3 is a schematic diagram showing respective pixel signals S_{ij} (namely, dark
current components D_{ij}) ($i = 1, \dots, n, j = 1, \dots, m$) of lines L_i and respective output
signals S_{obj} ($j = 1, \dots, m$) of a vertical optical black portion OB_h in the case where an FDA
15 11b is generating heat, insulating outer light;

Fig. 4 is a schematic diagram showing a structure of a dark current correcting
circuit 15;

Fig. 5 is a flow chart showing an operation of the dark current correcting circuit
15;

20 Fig. 6 is a schematic diagram describing a characteristic of the second
embodiment of the present invention;

Fig. 7 is a schematic diagram showing a structure of a dark current correcting
circuit 25;

Fig. 8 is a flow chart showing an operation of the dark current correcting circuit
25 25;

Fig. 9 is a schematic diagram showing pixels whose dark current components are equal in value;

Fig. 10 is a schematic diagram showing a structure of a dark current correcting circuit 35; and

5 Fig. 11 is a flow chart showing an operation of the dark current correcting circuit 35.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

Next, with reference to the accompanying drawings, embodiments of the present
10 invention will be described.

[First embodiment]

With reference to Fig. 1, Fig. 2, Fig. 3, Fig. 4, and Fig. 5, the first embodiment of the present invention will be described.

The first embodiment is directed to an electronic camera (imaging device)
15 according to the present invention.

Fig. 1 is a schematic diagram showing a structure of the electronic camera according to the first embodiment (the second embodiment and the third embodiment that will be described later).

The electronic camera 10 includes a Charge Coupled Device (CCD) imaging sensor
20 11, a Correlated Double Sampling circuit (CDS) 12, a Programmable Gain Amplifier (PGA) 13, an Analog to Digital converter (A/D) 14, a dark current correcting circuit 15, a signal processing circuit 16, an image processing circuit 17, an image memory 18, and an offset correcting circuit 19. An image of an object formed by a lens (not shown) is formed on the CCD imaging sensor 11.

25 Pixel signals that are successively output from the CCD imaging sensor 11 are

sent to the correlated double sampling circuit 12, the programmable gain amplifier 13, the A/D converter 14, the dark current correcting circuit 15, and the signal processing circuit 16 and successively processed thereby, respectively. Thereafter, each pixel signal is processed in units of one frame by the image processing circuit 17, and then
5 stored in the image memory 18.

Among those portions, the dark current correcting circuit 15 (which will be described later in detail) is a feature portion of the electronic camera 10 according to the present embodiment.

The offset correcting circuit 19 performs an offset correction for each pixel signal
10 in one frame almost uniformly.

Figs. 2(a) and 2(b) are schematic diagrams describing the CCD imaging sensor 11.

As shown in Fig. 2 (a), an effective pixel area 11a, an optical black area OB, a floating diffusion amplifier (FDA) 11b, and a horizontally transferring CCD 11c are arranged on the CCD imaging sensor 11 (a vertically transferring CCD in the effective
15 pixel area 11a is not shown).

Pixel signals S_{ij} ($i = 1, \dots, n, j = 1, \dots, m$) of respective effective pixels P_{ij} in the effective pixel area 11a are successively read through the horizontally transferring CCD 11c and the FDA 11b.

Meanwhile, "i" represents a line number starting from 1 and ends with n, whereas
20 "j" represents a pixel position number in the line, starting from 1 and ends with m.

Now, the vertical optical black portion OBh shown in Fig. 2 (a) will be considered.

The vertical optical black portion OBh is composed of optical black pixels P_{OBj} ($j = 1, \dots, m$) for one line that are arranged closer to the horizontally transferring CCD 11c than the top line L_1 of the effective pixel area 11a.

25 Output signals S_{OBj} ($j = 1, \dots, m$) of these optical black pixels P_{OBj} ($j = 1, \dots, m$)

are also successively read through the horizontally transferring CCD 11c and the FDA 11b.

The output signals S_{0Bj} ($j = 1, \dots, m$) of the vertical optical black portion OBh arranged in this position are read before the pixel signals S_{1j} ($j = 1, \dots, m$) of the top line L_1 .

As shown with concentric circle curves in Fig. 2 (b), the vertical optical black portion OBh is affected by heat of the FDA 11b like the effective pixel area 11a.

Thus, based on the output signals S_{0Bj} ($j = 1, \dots, m$) of the vertical optical black portion OBh, dark current components that locally occur in the effective pixel area 11a, namely, dark current components D_{ij} ($i = 1, \dots, n, j = 1, \dots, m$) that are superimposed on the pixel signals S_{ij} ($i = 1, \dots, n, j = 1, \dots, m$), respectively, can be obtained.

Fig. 3 is a schematic diagram showing pixel signals S_{ij} (namely, dark current components D_{ij}) ($i = 1, \dots, n, j = 1, \dots, m$) of respective lines L_i ($i = 1, \dots, n$) and output signals S_{0Bj} ($j = 1, \dots, m$) of the vertical optical black portion OBh in the case where the FDA 11b generates heat, insulating outer light.

As is clear from Fig. 3, the amounts of dark current components D_{ij} differ among lines. However, curves C_i ($i = 1, \dots, n$) of the dark current component D_{ij} ($j = 1, \dots, m$) of lines L_i are correlated with curves C_{0B} of the output signals S_{0Bj} ($j = 1, \dots, m$) of the vertical optical black portion OBh.

According to the present embodiment, it is assumed that there are proportional relations between the curves C_i ($i = 1, \dots, n$) and the curves C_{0B} , respectively.

In this case, with the output signals S_{0Bj} ($j = 1, \dots, m$) and coefficients γ_i predetermined for the line L_i , the dark current components D_{ij} ($j = 1, \dots, m$) of the lines L_i are obtained by the following formula (1).

$$D_{ij} = \gamma_i \times S_{0Bj} \quad (j = 1, \dots, m) \quad \dots \quad (1)$$

Fig. 4 is a schematic diagram showing a structure of the dark current correcting circuit 15.

Fig. 5 is a flow chart showing an operation of the dark current correcting circuit 15.

5 As shown in Fig. 4, the dark current correcting circuit 15 includes an operating circuit 15a, a line memory 15b, a look-up table (LUT) 15c, and an adder 15d. The look-up table 15c corresponds to the storage unit of the present invention. The operating circuit 15a and the line memory 15b correspond to the dark current obtaining unit of the present invention. The adder 15d corresponds to the correcting unit of the present
10 invention.

The coefficients γ_i predetermined for the lines L_i are correlated with the line numbers "i" of the lines L_i and pre-stored in the look-up table 15c for the lines L_i ($i = 1, \dots, n$), respectively.

Each time the CCD imaging sensor 11 (refer to Fig. 1) has accumulated electric
15 charges for one frame, the dark current correcting circuit 15 operates as follows.

As shown in Fig. 5, the dark current correcting circuit 15 receives output signals $SO_{B1}, SO_{B2}, \dots, SO_{Bm}$ of the vertical optical black portion OBh that are first output from the CCD imaging sensor 11, and then stores them in the line memory 15b (at step S11).

With reference to the look-up table 15c, the operating circuit 15a of the dark
20 current correcting circuit 15 reads the coefficient " γ_1 " correlated with the line number "1" of the top line L_1 .

By multiplying the coefficient " γ_1 " by the respective signals $SO_{B1}, SO_{B2}, \dots, SO_{Bm}$ stored in the line memory 15b (formula (1)), the operating circuit 15a obtains the dark current components $D_{11}, D_{12}, \dots, D_{1m}$ (step S13), respectively.

25 On the other hand, pixel signals $S_{11}, S_{12}, \dots, S_{1m}$ of the top line L_1 output from the

CCD imaging sensor 11 subsequently to the output signals So_{B1} , So_{B2} , ..., So_{Bm} of the vertical optical black portion OBh are sequentially input to the adder 15d.

By inputting inverted dark current components D_{11} , D_{12} , ..., D_{1m} obtained by step S13 to the adder 15d, the operating circuit 15a subtracts the dark current components D_{11} , D_{12} , ..., D_{1m} from the pixel signals S_{11} , S_{12} , ..., S_{1m} (at step S14), respectively.

By the subtraction, the pixel signals S_{11} , S_{12} , ..., S_{1m} of the top line L_1 are corrected against the dark currents.

Thereafter, pixel signals S_{21} , S_{22} , ..., S_{31} , S_{32} , ... of the lines L_2 , L_3 , ... that are output from the CCD imaging sensor 11 are successively input to the dark current correcting circuit 15. The same processes of steps S13 and S14 are preformed for the lines L_2 , L_3 , ... as those for the top line L_1 (the flow advances to step S15 to step S16 No to step S13 to step S14 to step S15).

The dark current correction for one frame is completed after the last line L_n has been processed (step S16 Yes).

As described above, the output signals So_{Bj} ($j = 1, \dots, m$) of the vertical optical black portion OBh represent dark current components that locally occur on the CCD imaging sensor 11.

The dark current correcting circuit 15 according to the present embodiment pre-stores relations (in this case, coefficients γ_i ($i = 1, \dots, n$)) between the output signals So_{Bj} ($j = 1, \dots, m$) and the dark current components D_{ij} ($i = 1, \dots, n$, $j = 1, \dots, m$) (reference numeral 15c shown in Fig. 4). By multiplying the output signals So_{Bj} ($j = 1, \dots, m$) by the coefficients γ_i ($i = 1, \dots, n$), the dark current correcting circuit 15 obtains the dark current components D_{ij} ($i = 1, \dots, n$, $j = 1, \dots, m$) (step S13). Then, by subtracting the dark current components D_{ij} ($i = 1, \dots, n$, $j = 1, \dots, m$) from the pixel signals S_{ij} ($i = 1, \dots, n$, $j = 1, \dots, m$), the dark current correcting circuit 15 corrects the dark currents

(step S14).

By the operation of the dark current correcting circuit 15, it reliably corrects dark current components that locally occur on the CCD imaging sensor 11 of the electronic camera 10 according to the present embodiment.

5 In addition, since the dark current correcting circuit 15 uses signals of the vertical optical black portion OBh that are read prior to signals of the top line L_1 of the effective pixel area 11a, the dark current correcting circuit 15 can correct the dark currents in real time.

Since the relations between the output signals S_{OBj} ($j = 1, \dots, m$) and the dark
10 current components D_{ij} ($i = 1, \dots, n, j = 1, \dots, m$) are represented approximately by coefficients γ_i ($i = 1, \dots, n$), the dark current correcting circuit 15 is capable of obtaining the dark current components D_{ij} ($i = 1, \dots, n, j = 1, \dots, m$) (step S13) by performing a simple calculation (in this case, multiplication).

In addition, since the dark current correcting circuit 15 according to the present
15 embodiment only stores one coefficient γ for each line, the size of the look-up table 15c becomes small.

[Second Embodiment]

Next, with reference to Fig. 1, Fig. 6, Fig. 7, and Fig. 8, a second embodiment of the present invention will be described. Likewise the first embodiment, the second
20 embodiment is directed to an electronic camera according to the present invention. In the following description, only points different from those of the first embodiment will be described, and thus the description of the redundant portions will be omitted.

As shown in Fig. 1, the electronic camera 20 according to the second embodiment has a dark current correcting circuit 25 instead of the dark current correcting circuit 15
25 in the electronic camera 10 of the first embodiment.

According to the first embodiment, as shown in Fig. 3, it is assumed that there are proportional relations between the curves C_i ($i = 1, \dots, n$) of the respective dark current components D_{ij} ($j = 1, \dots, m$) of the line L_i and the curves C_{OB} of the respective output signals S_{OBj} ($j = 1, \dots, m$) of the vertical optical black portion OBh.

5 In the second embodiment, as shown in Fig. 6, it is assumed that differences between the curves C_i ($i = 1, \dots, n$) of the respective dark current components D_{ij} ($j = 1, \dots, m$) of the line L_i and the curves C_{OB} of the respective output signals S_{OBj} ($j = 1, \dots, m$) of the vertical optical black portion OBh are constant.

In this case, with the output signals S_{OBj} ($j = 1, \dots, m$) and the subtraction values Δ_i predetermined for the line L_i , the dark current components D_{ij} ($j = 1, \dots, m$) of the lines L_i can be obtained by the following formula (2).

$$D_{ij} = S_{OBj} - \Delta_i \quad (j = 1, \dots, m) \quad \dots \quad (2)$$

Fig. 7 is a schematic diagram showing a structure of the dark current correcting circuit 25.

15 Fig. 8 is a flow chart showing an operation of the dark current correcting circuit 25.

As shown in Fig. 7, the dark current correcting circuit 25 includes an operating circuit 25a and a look-up table 25c instead of the operating circuit 15a and the look-up table 15c, respectively, in the dark current correcting circuit 15 of the first embodiment as shown in Fig. 4.

20 The look-up table 25c pre-stores the subtraction values Δ_i predetermined for the lines L_i ($i = 1, \dots, n$) and correlated with the line numbers "i" of the lines L_i , respectively.

The flow chart of Fig. 8 shows an operation of the dark current correcting circuit 25. In the flow chart shown in Fig. 8, step S23 is executed instead of step S13 in the flow chart shown in Fig. 5.

At step S23, with reference to the look-up table 25c, the operating circuit 25a reads the subtraction values Δ_i correlated with the line numbers "i" of the lines L_i . In addition, by subtracting the subtraction values Δ_i from the signals $S_{OB1}, S_{OB2}, \dots, S_{OBm}$ stored in the line memory 15b (formula (2)), the operating circuit 25a obtains the dark current components $D_{i1}, D_{i2}, \dots, D_{im}$, respectively.

In other words, the dark current correcting circuit 25 according to the present embodiment pre-stores the subtraction values Δ_i ($i = 1, \dots, n$) as the relations between the output signals S_{OBj} ($j = 1, \dots, m$) and the dark current components D_{ij} ($i = 1, \dots, n, j = 1, \dots, m$) (reference numeral 25c shown in Fig. 7). In addition, by subtracting the subtraction values Δ_i ($i = 1, \dots, n$) from the output signals S_{OBj} ($j = 1, \dots, m$), the dark current correcting circuit 25 obtains the respective dark current components D_{ij} ($i = 1, \dots, n, j = 1, \dots, m$) (step S23). Moreover, by subtracting the dark current components D_{ij} ($i = 1, \dots, n, j = 1, \dots, m$) from the pixel signals S_{ij} ($i = 1, \dots, n, j = 1, \dots, m$), the dark current correcting circuit 25 corrects the dark currents (step S14).

Thus, the dark current correcting circuit 25 according to the present embodiment is different from the dark current correcting circuit 15 according to the first embodiment in that the former pre-stores "subtraction values Δ_i ($i = 1, \dots, n$)" as the information pre-stored therein and obtains the dark current components by a subtraction.

However, the dark current correcting circuit 25 according to the present embodiment has the same characteristic as the dark current correcting circuit 15 according to the first embodiment in that they use the output signals S_{OB} of the vertical optical black portion OB_h representing dark current components that locally occur on the CCD imaging sensor 11.

Thus, likewise the electronic camera 10 according to the first embodiment, the electronic camera 20 according to the present embodiment is capable of reliably

correcting the dark current components that locally occur on the CCD imaging sensor 11.

In addition, since the dark current correcting circuit 25 according to the present embodiment uses signals of the vertical optical black portion OBh that are read before the top line L₁ of the effective pixel area 11a, the dark current correcting circuit 25 is capable of correcting the dark currents in real time.

In addition, since the relations between the output signals S_{OBJ} (j = 1, ... , m) and the dark current components D_{ij} (i = 1, ... , n, j = 1, ... , m) are approximately represented by the subtraction values Δ_i (i = 1, ... , n), the dark current correcting circuit 25 according to the present embodiment is capable of obtaining the dark current components D_{ij} (i = 1, ... , n, j = 1, ... , m) (step S23) by performing a simple calculation (in this case, subtraction).

In addition, the dark current correcting circuit 25 according to the present embodiment only stores one subtraction value Δ for one line of the effective pixel area 11a. Thus, the size of the look-up table 25c becomes small.

[Third Embodiment]

Next, with reference to Fig. 1, Fig. 2, Fig. 9, Fig. 10, and Fig. 11, the third embodiment of the present invention will be described.

Likewise the foregoing first and second embodiments, the third embodiment is directed to an electronic camera according to the present invention. In the following description, only points different from those of the first or second embodiment will be described and thus the description of the redundant portions will be omitted.

As shown in Fig. 1, the electronic camera 30 according to the third embodiment has a dark current correcting circuit 35 instead of the dark current correcting circuit 15 of the electronic camera 10 according to the first embodiment.

According to the first embodiment or the second embodiment, it is assumed that

there are specific relations between the curves C_i ($i=1, \dots, n$) of the respective dark current components D_{ij} ($i = 1, \dots, n, j = 1, \dots, m$) of the lines L_i and the curves C_{OB} of the respective output signals S_{OBj} ($j=1, \dots, m$) of the vertical optical black portion OBh.

However, according to the first embodiment and the second embodiment, since these specific relations approximately represents real relations, respectively, corrected dark currents contain some errors even though the sizes of the look-up tables 15c and 25b become small.

In contrast, the dark current correcting circuit 35 according to the present embodiment is structured so that the primary importance is put on the correcting accuracy of the dark current.

Since the influence of generated heat radially spreads as shown in Fig. 2 (b), dark current components superimposed on pixel signals of pixels having the same distance from the FDA 11b, which is a heat source, become equal.

Fig. 9 shows curves that connect pixels whose dark current components are equal.

The dark current components D_{ij} of the effective pixels P_{ij} in the effective pixel area 11a are equal to the dark current components of the optical black pixels $P_{OBR(i,j)}$ at the positions $R(i,j)$ which are at the same distances from the effective pixels P_{ij} and the FDA 11b, respectively, in the vertical optical black portion OBh.

Thus, with reference to the output signals $S_{OBR(i,j)}$ of the optical black pixels $P_{OBR(i,j)}$ at the positions $R(i,j)$ which are at the same distances from the effective pixels P_{ij} and the FDA 11b, respectively, in the vertical optical black portion OBh, the dark current components D_{ij} of the effective pixels P_{ij} can be obtained.

In other words, with the output signals S_{OBj} ($j=1, \dots, m$) and the reference positions $R(i,j)$ predetermined for the effective pixels P_{ij} , the dark current components D_{ij} of the effective pixels P_{ij} can be obtained by the following formula (3).

$$D_{ij} = S_{OBR(i,j)} \quad (j=1, \dots, m) \quad \dots \quad (3)$$

Fig. 10 is a schematic diagram showing a structure of the dark current correcting circuit 35.

Fig. 11 is a flow chart showing an operation of the dark current correcting circuit 35.

As shown in Fig. 10, the dark current correcting circuit 35 includes an operating circuit 35a and a look-up table 35c instead of the operating circuit 15a and the look-up table 15c of the dark current correcting circuit 15 according to the first embodiment as shown in Fig. 4.

In the look-up table 35c, the reference positions $R(i, j)$ predetermined for the effective pixels P_{ij} are correlated with the pixel positions " i, j " of the respective effective pixels P_{ij} , and pre-stored for the effective pixels P_{ij} ($i = 1, \dots, n, j = 1, \dots, m$), respectively.

The flow chart of Fig. 11 shows an operation of the dark current correcting circuit 35. In this chart, the following step S33 is executed instead of step S13 in the flow chart shown in Fig. 5.

At step S33, with reference to the look-up table 35c, the operating circuit 35a reads the reference positions " $R(i, 1)$ " correlated with the positions " $i, 1$ " of the top pixels P_{i1} of the line L_i .

In addition, with reference to the signals $S_{OBR(i, 1)}$ of the optical black pixels $P_{OBR(i, 1)}$ at the reference positions $R(i, 1)$ from the line memory 15b, the operating circuit 35a obtains the dark current components D_{i1} (formula (3)).

Likewise, the operating circuit 35a reads the reference positions $R(i, 2), R(i, 3), \dots$ correlated with the successive effective pixels P_{i2}, P_{i3}, \dots from the look-up table 35c.

Thereafter, with reference to the signals $S_{OBR(i, 2)}, S_{OBR(i, 3)}, \dots$ of the optical black pixels

$P_{OBR(i, 2)}, P_{OBR(i, 3)}, \dots$ at the reference positions $R(i, 2), R(i, 3), \dots$ from the line memory 15b (formula (3)), the operating circuit 35a obtains the dark current components D_{i2}, D_{i3}, \dots (step S33).

In other words, the dark current correcting circuit 35 according to the present embodiment pre-stores the reference positions $R(i, j)$ ($i = 1, \dots, n, j = 1, \dots, m$) as the relations between the output signals S_{OBj} ($j = 1, \dots, m$) and the dark current components D_{ij} ($i = 1, \dots, n, j = 1, \dots, m$) (reference numeral 35c shown in Fig. 10). In addition, with reference to the output signals $S_{OBR(i, j)}$ of the optical black pixels $P_{OBR(i, j)}$ at the reference positions $R(i, j)$ ($i = 1, \dots, n, j = 1, \dots, m$), the dark current correcting circuit 35 obtains the respective dark current components D_{ij} ($i = 1, \dots, n, j = 1, \dots, m$) (step S33). Further, by subtracting the dark current components D_{ij} ($i = 1, \dots, n, j = 1, \dots, m$) from the pixel signals S_{ij} ($i = 1, \dots, n, j = 1, \dots, m$), the dark current correcting circuit 35 corrects the dark currents (step S14).

Thus, since the dark current correcting circuit 35 according to the present embodiment pre-stores information of respective effective pixels, the size of the look-up table 35c becomes large. However, since the information is not the approximation of the relations between the dark current components D_{ij} and the output signals S_{OBj} but "reference positions $R(i, j)$ ($i = 1, \dots, n, j = 1, \dots, m$)", the accuracy of the corrected dark current is high.

In addition, since the dark current correcting circuit 35 uses signals of the vertical optical black portion OBh that are read prior to that of the top line L_1 of the effective pixel area 11a, the dark current correcting circuit 35 is capable of correcting the dark currents in real time.

[Others]

Since the electronic cameras according to the foregoing embodiments reliably

correct dark current components that locally occur, it is not necessary to suppress the bias current applied to the FDA of the CCD imaging sensor 11.

In addition, although the look-up tables 15c and 25c of the dark current correcting circuits 15 and 25 according to the first and second embodiments store relations (γ , Δ) with the vertical optical black portion for respective lines, the look-up tables 15c and 25c can be structured as follows.

Namely, the look-up tables 15c and 25c store the relations (γ , Δ) with the vertical optical black portion only for the top line, and for the rest of the lines, store the relations with their respective preceding lines. On the other hand, when obtaining the dark current components of the respective lines, the operating circuits 15a and 25a refer to the dark current components of the preceding lines.

In such a structure, since signals of the vertical optical black portion are referenced only when obtaining the dark current components of the top line, the line memory 15b can be omitted.

In addition, in the electronic camera 30 according to the third embodiment, the number of optical black pixels to be referenced by the dark current correcting circuit 35 is m (for one line of the effective pixel area). However, the number of optical black pixels to be referenced by the dark current correcting circuit 35 may be larger than for one line so as to improve the accuracy.

Further, in the above embodiments, although the dark current correcting circuits 15, 25, and 35 of the electronic cameras 10, 20, and 30 reference the signals of the vertical optical black portion, it is needless to say that they may reference output signals of other portion in the optical black area, such as a horizontal optical black portion. However, referring to the output signals of the vertical optical black portion is more favorable than referring to those of the other portion in the optical black area, since the

dark current correcting circuits 15, 25, and 35 can correct the dark currents in real time.

Moreover, in the electronic cameras 10, 20, and 30 according to the foregoing embodiments, the dark current correcting circuits 15, 25, and 35 and the signal processing circuit 16 are structured as different circuits. Alternatively, a part of the signal processing circuit 16 may be modified so that it performs the same process as the dark current correcting circuits 15, 25, and 35.

In addition, according to the foregoing embodiments, electronic cameras equipped with a CCD imaging sensor are described as examples. However, the present invention can be also applied to electronic cameras equipped with other type of imaging sensor, such as a CMOS type imaging sensor.

The invention is not limited to the above embodiments and various modifications may be made without departing from the spirit and scope of the invention. Any improvement may be made in part or all of the components.